



# HIGHLIGHTS

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## MetLife Foundation Best Practices in Student Retention

### MetLife Foundation Honors Four Colleges for Successful Student Retention Efforts

Four community colleges have been honored as recipients of the 2004-2005 *MetLife Foundation Best-Practice College Award*. The award highlights the approaches each college has put in place to help students stay in school to achieve their educational goals. The winning colleges are Housatonic Community College (Connecticut), San Juan College (New Mexico), Santa Fe Community College (Florida), and Valencia Community College (Florida).

Each award-winning college receives a cash award of \$10,000 and will be featured in *CCSSE Highlights*, a publication for community and technical colleges across the country.

“Community colleges must always be looking for ways to help students stay in school and achieve their academic goals,” says Sibyl Jacobson, MetLife Foundation President and CEO. “These four award-winning colleges respond to student needs with innovative programs. We are pleased to recognize their excellent work.”

Through the *Initiative on Student Success*, the MetLife Foundation recognizes those colleges that are producing exemplary results in student retention and highlights the key strategies those colleges have put in place to help students succeed. In its third year, the *Initiative on Student Success* operates through the Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas at Austin.

### Best-Practice College Profiles

**Housatonic Community College** serves 4,700 students (fall credit headcount enrollment) in urban Bridgeport, Connecticut, the largest and poorest city in the state. The students are ethnically diverse and, like many community college students throughout the country, have many obligations outside of college that make it difficult to focus on

coursework. Learning from student experiences, faculty and staff observations, and best practices from other colleges in the country, Housatonic designed flexible programs based on high quality, accessible instruction and student services, including:

- advising for all students prior to registration with an assigned faculty advisor familiar with the student’s program;
- online tutoring to better serve weekend and evening students;
- emergency funds for students with unexpected financial difficulties; and,
- additional support services for ADA students, including individual and small group tutoring.

During a period of rapid growth — a more than 70% increase in enrollment in the last eight years — Housatonic has steadily increased retention and graduation rates. The college has learned that each area of the college must have sufficient flexibility and autonomy to be able to adapt quickly to students’ changing needs.

**San Juan College** serves more than 5,200 credit students, with slightly more than half attending full-time. The college is located in the isolated, rural, low-income community of Farmington, New Mexico. Since 1999, San Juan has increased its enrollment by more than 33%. Twenty-three percent of the student population is Native American, 85% are the first in their families to attend college, and almost all students require remediation before they can enroll in college-level courses. San Juan faculty employ instructional approaches that build and support academic skills development linked to career goals. The college — recognized as 4<sup>th</sup> in the country among two-year institutions in awarding degrees to Native American students — has put a number of strategies in place for students needing extra support:

- mandatory advising with faculty advisors for students seeking degrees;
- cross-disciplinary “learning communities” that link courses in several content areas with student services and learning support staff;
- early alert and intervention system to identify students who need extra help; and,

- Student Success Class — a three-credit-hour introductory course for first-time students.

San Juan is showing significant gains in both retention and success of its students. In addition, students are telling the college, through surveys and focus groups, that the opportunity to develop a connection and a sense of community at San Juan keeps them in class and helps them succeed.

**Santa Fe Community College** is located in Gainesville, Florida. The college enrolls more than 13,800 credit students in career and transfer programs. When college leaders saw that students were falling behind their peers across the state in test scores and graduation rates, they took steps to improve student success with a goal of *intentional* retention — enrollment leading to a degree. In addressing the needs of degree students, SFCC borrowed strategies already in place in its career programs, which lead Florida in retention, completion, and placement. Santa Fe’s initiatives focus on advisement, instruction, and connection:

- required advising prior to class registration and an interactive online advisement system;
- fast-track “flexterms” and hybrid online/onsite classes to enable students to complete their coursework more quickly;
- a “reach out” program to maintain contact with students who miss class and to connect them with needed college services; and,
- a wide variety of programs to involve commuting students in college life.

Santa Fe’s efforts are paying off, showing significant gains in student performance, retention, and student satisfaction with the community college experience. The college has learned that successful retention efforts require participation and support from the entire college.

**Valencia Community College** is a multi-campus, urban college serving the greater Orlando, Florida area. The college is one of the largest in the country, enrolling more than 29,600 widely diverse credit students. Dissatisfied with students’ completion rates, Valencia has worked to create a “learning-centered” college through a variety of initiatives:

- a student success course focused on helping students set career goals and educational plans, identify learning styles, develop academic skills, and make connections with college resources to support their goals;
- professional development programs for all faculty and staff, focused on serving under-prepared and diverse students;

- developmental advising to help students adjust to the college environment, develop career and educational plans, and acquire study and life skills; and,
- “Start Right” strategies that include changes in procedures, processes, and interactions with students during the enrollment process.

Valencia’s initiatives have helped the college become first in the nation in the number of associate degrees awarded. The college is also seeing a steady increase in student retention and number of credit hours taken by students. As Valencia has introduced initiatives designed to help students succeed, the college has also worked to develop a culture that is comfortable with testing the effectiveness of its approaches and making changes for improvement.

### The Selection Process

Selection of the award-winning colleges was based on each college’s performance on the ‘retention index’ from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). Last spring, students from more than 150 community colleges across the country took the CCSSE survey. The survey assesses college practices and student behaviors that research shows are important to a successful college experience.

The retention index reflects students’ experiences with the college in three areas that have been proven to contribute to students remaining in college:

- active and collaborative learning in and out of the classroom;
- a high level of interaction between students and faculty; and,
- programs and practices that support learners in a number of ways.

Award-winning colleges use the CCSSE results, along with data from other indicators of student success, to continually make improvements that will benefit students. The colleges then measure the effectiveness of those changes to insure that specific approaches are meeting students’ needs.

Ten other community colleges were selected as semi-finalists for the *MetLife Foundation Best-Practice College Awards*: Dona Ana Branch Community College (New Mexico), Hawaii Community College, Mayland Community College (North Carolina), Miami-Dade Community College (Florida), New Mexico State University - Grants, North Florida Community College, Prince George’s Community College (Maryland), St. Philip’s College (Texas), Texas State Technical College - Marshall, and West Virginia State Community and Technical College.